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THE RELIGIOUS NURTURE OF ADOLESCENTS

BY

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Members of the Institute are urged to read this paper in close connection with the one entitled "The Government of Adolescent Young People." In the latter there is a brief outline of the development of youth, physically, mentally, socially and morally, a statement of the ruling motives of the period, and a discussion of methods of developing responsibility, especially in those of prodigal tendency.

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THE RELIGIOUS NURTURE OF ADOLESCENTS

"There is no more priggish business in the world than that of 'developing one's own character.' Character is a by-product developed in service."—*Woodrow Wilson.*

Religious Influences: Conversion—Prayer—The Bible—The Church—The Sunday School—Personal Influence—Religious Living.

When we talk about the religious nurture of young children we emphasize habit-forming and ethical teaching. These are two prepartives for good living largely administered by adults. They are two things that, after all, are externals. These are all well and proper, because the young child is hardly a personality yet, and it is a stage previous to a real awakening to religious impulses. But with adolescence all is different. Religion now becomes a personal matter. There is hardly a normal youth of fourteen or fifteen who is not keenly sensitive to impulses which, no matter what his home training and influences, we must regard as idealistic and altruistic; in short, religious. Every part of the youth's being at this time has become sensitive to religious impulses. His bodily acts are now recognized, even by himself, as being expressions of the spirit. Especially close is the relation between the newly developed sex-function and passions, and the ideals. Every boy feels a sensitiveness of conscience as to the control of this function, and usually finds that his growing interest in the other sex has a bearing, favorable or unfavorable, upon the development of his religious ideals. With girls the same is true, and the development is earlier. With both the activities of church young people's organizations during this period are strongly, though no doubt unconsciously, intertwined with the personal interests of the boy and girl members in each other. The boy's intellect now carries him off into new curiosities, and especially on a quest for the settlement of problems now for the first time recognized as personal. Socially, the conscience of a boy or girl seems for a while to be in the keeping of the gang or set. Instead of being an individual character, the youth and his chums seem to represent a conjunct character, each of which contributes certain elements. Yet after a time it is noticeable that the young people have been maturing religiously somewhat more rapidly than they have socially, and after one is old enough to have succeeded in emancipating himself from his crowd, it turns out that he has been achieving a definite religious as well as mental character of his own.

Young women are, no doubt, somewhat more sensitive to the emotional influences of organized religion than are young men. Girls are more likely than boys to be converted at a revival. Boys are somewhat more likely than girls to make their religious committals in

solitude. Girls, whether by nature or greater docility, conform more readily than do boys to devotional habits and expression, and are always in the majority in religious societies intended for both sexes. The gang spirit or the sex consciousness among boys inclines them until close to maturity to religious movements in which only boys and men are found. It would be difficult to show, from the mere fact that more girls than boys fall into line with religious movements, that girls are more religious than boys. Girls are certainly more full of religious emotion, more devotional, more conformable, probably more willing to sacrifice; but boys do more independent religious thinking, have fewer reactions and respond with enthusiasm to the doing side of religion.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES.

The problem of writing about religious nurture for this period, then, is to say anything about the period that does not have religious bearing. It would almost seem to be enough to ask the reader to turn back through other chapters of this survey and reread them. Let us take a fresh start, however, by confining our discussion to some of the *influences* which, whether they are consciously so recognized or not, affect a youth's religious life.

We ought to grant at the outset that we do not know very much how the religious life develops. It is still true that "the wind bloweth where it listeth, and we hear the sound thereof, but know not whence it cometh nor whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." We are aware in a general way of those two types of people which William James made familiar as the "once-born" and the "twice-born." The twice-born have confessed themselves in literature; we know of their conversions, their repentances, their back-slidings and their ecstasies, but really neither we nor they can say how much these experiences have had to do with the life of the will and with religious conduct. We ourselves who are of the type look back upon some of these experiences as epoch-making to us, yet as they recede we sometimes grow a bit skeptical as to their relative importance. Youth, at least, pass through them and emerge apparently not much altered. It is still a fair question whether an enjoyable conversion has had as much effect upon the motives and after-life of a given individual as an hour of poignant shame over a failure. The once-born are for the most part silent, and yet they form, no doubt, a considerable and worthy minority of the human race. Undoubtedly, a large number of them enter the kingdom of God. But their religious experience omits a definite turning point of crisis and lacks the emotional elements of the others.

CONVERSION.

There was a time when, in orthodox Christian homes, the great concern was that at the proper time the children should be converted. This is still with many parents the most earnest expectation and endeavor. The churches to which such parents usually belong arrange periodically for protracted meetings or special occasions in Sunday-school when appeals shall be made to the young, the response to which shall be such conversions. Nobody can doubt the effectiveness for such a purpose of the incentives and methods which are used, and there are many versed in the psychology of religion who believe that such experiences are the emotional birthright of the young soul, and that such committals are a powerful and divinely planned reinforcement to the religious will. Yet we must acknowledge that increasing numbers of young persons are being received into Christian churches who would be genuinely puzzled if they were asked whether they had been "converted," and it would be hard to prove that they did not become just as good Christians. This we believe, on the whole, to be wholesome. It indicates that young people are coming along in an increasing number of homes just as we have advocated, their wills trained by wholesome habit-forming, their social relations carefully guarded and shared by their parents, their intellectual doubts frankly met and their hearts trained to love that which is true, beautiful and good. In such households, loyal to the Church, there is the expectancy that the child will some time be called to align himself with the divine institution which is like a larger family, of which his parents and friends are already a part. Whether we all agree with these statements or not, may we not at least find a common meeting-point in the conviction that the experience of conversion is by no means the only influence to bring to bear upon an adolescent?

PRAYER.

As has already been said, it is difficult for us to appraise the relative power of influences, but it would seem that *prayer* was one of the first importance, and never more so than in the days when a youth is learning by frequent failures to distrust his own powers and by increasing responsibilities to feel his spiritual loneliness. We have elsewhere urged (when speaking of the Religious Nurture of School Children), that a child's prayers should grow as he grows, but it is not easy during the reticent years to learn what a youth's prayers are like. It is certainly not to be supposed that one's private petitions are those which are occasionally heard from the lips of youths in Christian Endeavor meetings. We gather from those rare persons who have found it

possible to organize small prayer circles of young people of this age that a boy's prayers are extremely short and simple, and that they are chiefly characterized by passionate petition for personal manliness. This, if true, seems wholesome. During the years when life appears to youth a good fight it would seem natural that they should regard the Eternal as their champion, and that communion should be to them a rehearsal of moral issues. Thus, I think, we should encourage the young to pray, and if also we can persuade them that those meditations which are so characteristic of their solitudes may be turned Godward, then we help them to spiritualize their day-dreaming.

THE BIBLE.

It must be confessed that *the Bible* often seems to lose its force during the adolescent years. Some conscientiously read it daily, but, one must think, as a sacred exercise rather than for its contents. They have heard its phrases so long that it does not grip the attention, and few know how to find their way in it.

We must be at least partly reconciled to this temporary loss of interest in the Book of Books, for we must remember, what will be more distinctly pointed out a little later, that it is only a part of the whole tendency of youth at this time, which is to turn from books to life. In childhood the Bible was enjoyed as a story-book; after youth has learned some of life's lessons the Bible will remain to most men and women a permanent storehouse of personal religious experiences.

THE CHURCH.

We often find this anomaly, that a boy feels religious impulses most strongly while at the same time he regards *the Church* with the most active distaste. Many become impatient with church-going because they are too restless physically to sit still. Sermons are hardly the natural nutriment of youth, and many young people have not the attentive power or the mastery of vocabulary to follow them intelligently through. To boys even more than to adults the man behind the address is the principal thing, and the minister who is a friend of boys finds them a challenging and friendly part of his congregation. We forget, too, that the domination of the gang follows the boy even to church. He likes to go only where his gang goes. If his gang goes to church, or if he finds that a gang which he would like to join goes, then he is quite willing to go, but in later adolescence if the companions of a boy or girl are non-churchgoers, and the local church does not make strong endeavor to appeal to their real interests, the problem of continuing such allegiance becomes a very difficult one.

The Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church have been especially wise, psychologically, in organizing themselves about the child in a fashion imitative of the family. The baptized child is accepted as a member of the ecclesiastical family, potentially regenerate. It is the tradition as well as the expectation that the child will come forward in adolescence to prove his knowledge of the fundamentals of the faith in the confirmation class; instead of waiting for a cataclysmal conversion, which may not come, before admitting him into full communion, the child is admitted upon attaining a fitting age and reasonable knowledge, and it is believed that in the solemn interim between the confirmation and the first communion and in the activities which follow, or in the fold of the Church with maturing character, spiritual life will gradually appear. So far as the influence of this plan can be thrown around children, what could be more admirably planned to secure a quiet, normal Christian development?

It is the writer's observation and experience that where religious committal through joining the church does not occur as the result of the catechumen process just mentioned, it almost invariably comes through the influence and example of companions. It would be hard to find a revival, Decision Day or any other church-membership campaign where the group spirit is not depended upon, and few ministers who work more quietly ignore the influence of the gang, clique or class in securing young adherents. This testimony to the conjunct nature of religious experience during adolescence has its meaning for the home, since it is a reminder that wholesome fellowships with children of similar age in the Church life are often potent influences toward calling out into consciousness a hitherto unformulated but developing religious impulse. The positive value of young people's societies within the Church, after such committals have been made, is not in their devotional exercises, which frequently strike an artificial note, but in their alliance of young Christians for self-protection and in their joint activities in the service of others.

THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL.

A great deal of distress is expressed because youth of this age lose their interest in Sunday-school. It seems to be forgotten that they are apparently at this time not interested in any kind of school. Many a youth is so engrossed with his own importance just now that he does not care much what anybody teaches him about anything. A great deal that takes place during the "opening exercises" of most Sunday-schools is to the average boy a bore. "The three-quarters of an hour singing is terrible," was the typical testimony of one suffering youth.

Such exercises are particularly hard to bear if the lad has just been to church. His semi-familiarity with the Bible especially causes him to feel impatience with a course of study which reviews that which he thinks he knows all about. He is also likely at this period to scorn methods of Bible study which seem to him unscientific, and, by inference, to express contempt for the Bible itself. It is necessary that courses of Bible study during these years should be particularly cautious not to teach a youth anything which he will later need to unlearn. The same frankness and liberty of research which is given in scientific subjects in high school should now be applied in the Sunday-school. But the great interest of boys and girls now is in what they call "real life." The popularity and success of courses of study which recognize this fact even in their titles, such as "Real Problems of High School Boys," "Life Problems of Young Men," "Young People's Problems," etc., shows that the youth has now come to a time when he will no longer accept facts on trust; when he is impatient with the question-and-answer method; when he wishes to express his own opinions as well as to hear others in discussion. Our best boys' classes in Sunday-school today are those in which strong, fearless men grapple in heart-to-heart contests with their pupils upon the problems of real life.

Over twenty years' observation has proven to the writer that the principal reason for the exodus of young people from the Sunday-school during the adolescent years is the loss of a good teacher. In this voluntary school whose subject is life, the living teacher is everything. We are writing here from the standpoint of the home. If I as a parent had a child for whom there was available no worthy Sunday-school teacher, I would regard that school as a complete failure so far as that child was concerned.

PERSONAL INFLUENCE.

This simply goes to confirm the point to which we have been moving—that the best influence which we can bring to bear upon a young person religiously is that of a good hero. Professor Tyler quotes Wendell Phillips as saying that the power that hurled slavery from its throne was young men dreaming dreams by patriots' graves. He thinks, sensibly, that the great orator would have acknowledged that a few living patriots might vivify the dream without disturbing it. We parents ought to regard as a happy day that one when our sons or daughters find in Sunday-school or in public school or anywhere else an adult friend who represents in his own person qualities which are really admirable for them to imitate. The writer recalls a splendid young Yale man whom two of his own sons had as a Sunday-school

teacher for six years. When, toward the close of that period, he heard one of them say that "he would rather be like F—— W—— than any one else on earth," he recognized the statement as no exaggeration, since both boys were recognizably absorbing the ideals of their hero. In the instance of one of them emulation of a manly high school teacher actually determined the choice of vocation. It was the deep philosophy of the Fourth Gospel that the Light of God is manifested only in the form of life, and so it has ever been. We need not entirely regret the temporary turning of boys from the Bible in their quest for a Book of Life written in real men, and we may well be persuaded that we can afford to allow our young people to lose some of the other good influences which we have commended if only they have found good friends.

But how shall we do this?

Well, we can be such friends to them ourselves. Do you know, this is not as easy as it sounds? There are today plenty of indulgent parents, plenty of parents whose examples are worth following, but there is still a lack of parents who are companionable with their children. I sit daily at the centre of a correspondence that comes from many thousands of parents from all over the country. Into the same offices come letters from their children. We thus get oftentimes both angles on a family situation, and I can truly say that I cannot remember a problem of the adolescent years presented to us that did not arise out of the distance that had come to exist between parent and child nor a single one of the many successful homes which was not explained by a beautiful comradeship. Frankly, the trouble is that we love our children, but we do not like them. Isn't that just it? We cling affectionately to their lives and health and future, but we do not like their clumsiness, their irritating ignorance and conceit, their maddening folly and obstinacy, their loss of all that we think is worth while.

Here comes a special need for fathers. We know how boys turn from their mothers to their fathers during adolescence, but we do not perhaps so clearly see the peculiar need which daughters now have for their fathers. True, a mother confessor was never more needed by a girl than just now, but, as Professor T. G. Soares has pointed out, there is one virtue which few mothers can teach their daughters, and that is unselfishness. By virtue of the dependence of the daughter upon her mother for clothes, the daughter becomes a demander and the mother the donor. The father ought to step in now and demand deference and chivalry as much from his daughters to their mother as from his sons, and especially in the way of keeping the place of

the mother first and not secondary to that of the daughter in the social life of the home and of the community.

I revere a man who can pray with his children, but I speak reverently when I say that I regard it as quite as religious a habit that he can play with them. It seems to me that incarnation, which is treated in theology as an isolated act of God, ought to become in life a human habit, and that it is the chief means by which fathers and mothers can bring their sons and daughters to God.

RELIGIOUS LIVING.

Whatever may be the religious experience of a child, we begin to feel that he has a genuine religious life when we first see him do something for somebody else. The writer of one of the epistles that bears the name of John says that "we know that we have passed out of death into life when we love the brethren." In the only distinct and positive statement which Jesus made regarding the nature of religion, He made religion a question of how a man behaves in the face of human need. He named six of the commonest of human needs: sickness, sorrow, loneliness, suffering, hunger, poverty, and suggested that our attitude toward these was the real test of our religion. It is this attitude, freely and generously taken, and not a system of dogmatics or ethics, which constitutes the religious life we ought to crave for our young people.

In the realm of service we have opportunity in at least three ways. The warm feeling of young people for those who are less fortunate may now properly be expressed through gifts which involve some sacrifice on their own part. They may now assume definite responsibility with special needs and objects of care. They may devote themselves with peculiar tenderness to the needs of those who are a little younger than themselves.

Some one has said recently that "the most neglected religious need of the child is that of being shown definitely what Christianity means for him along the line of his daily activities." We know that at least three-fourths of the religious action of an adult consists in doing his daily duties well. In this respect we must confess that a youth shows himself a crusader rather than a cross-bearer. I could easily imagine a high school boy teaching a Sunday-school class and habitually neglecting to bring up the coal. The trait is human. We all would rather pick flowers than dig up weeds. I would be patient with this manifestation. I would not taunt such a boy with his public goodness or his meagre private virtues. I would be thankful that he had the will to serve, and wait for the later consecration when he performs hated duties, as many of us do, only with grumbling.

The last task of religious nurture is, no doubt, to continue to supply motives and incentives to our sons and daughters which shall lead them to a centralizing and dynamic life purpose, that shall gradually take up into itself school work, home tasks, fidelity to commissions and all the homely minutiae of daily life. The preserved habits of childhood will help much in this direction, but they tend to decay unless there be the quickening power of a new motive.

When this is successfully attained and our young people begin to show self-propelling goodness, the work of religious nurture has come to its harvest.

REFERENCES.

NOTE.—Any book mentioned here will be freely loaned to any member of the Institute upon application. They may also be purchased if desired.

EDUCATIONAL EVANGELISM, 265 pp., by Charles E. McKinley, published by the Pilgrim Press, Boston.

A thoughtful study of the way the religious life develops during adolescence and of the problems of nurture through the church.

EDUCATION IN RELIGION AND MORALS, 434 pp., by George A. Coe, published by Fleming H. Revell Co., New York.

Dr. Coe furnishes a valuable account of the way the religious impulse develops in children and youth. He then considers the home, the church and the church organizations in their relation to religious education.

THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL AND THE TEENS, 416 pp., edited by John L. Alexander, published by the Association Press, New York.

Results of a study by a special commission of the International Sunday-school movement. It gives a wealth of information concerning adolescent development, Sunday-school methods, social organizations for the young, home conditions and community instrumentalities for social welfare.

THE GIRL IN HER TEENS, 127 pp., by Margaret Slattery, published by the Sunday School Times Co., Philadelphia.

Our best study of girlhood. In a simple and sympathetic manner, Miss Slattery approaches the physical, the mental, the spiritual and the social side of girlhood, and discusses her relation to the Sunday-school, to the church, to the Bible and to everyday life.

SUGGESTIVE QUESTIONS.

The purpose of these questions is to help the reader think over what he has read and to form the basis for correspondence with and counsel from the Institute upon this subject.

1. What are some of the differences between a child of ten and one of sixteen which must modify our methods of religious nurture?

2. What are some of the qualities of which young people are capable at this latter age of which they were not at the former?
3. What influences must we substitute for the authority exercised before?
4. What are some of the ruling motives of adolescence? (Name in "The Government of Adolescent Young People.")
5. What differences do you remember or have you noticed between the religious development of boys and of girls of this period?
6. Should we seek for a religious conversion for our young people?
7. What influences are likely to move a given young person (one you have in mind) toward church membership?
8. Does your church have a religious young people's society which is wholesome for this person?
9. How may I help young people whom I influence to make religion more definitely a matter of daily living?

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The religious nurture of adolescents
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American Institute of Child Life)
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Church work with teenagers. I. Title

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